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# PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

## Rubella (German Measles)

Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 150 Tremont Street, Boston, MA 02111

### What is rubella?

Rubella (also called German measles) is a very contagious disease caused by a virus. Rubella is very dangerous in pregnant women because it can harm the fetus.

### What are the symptoms of rubella?

The most common symptoms are mild fever, headache, swelling of the lymph glands (often in the back of the neck), and a rash that lasts about three days. About half of all people who get the disease do not get the rash. Swollen and painful joints and bleeding under the skin are less common, and neither symptom lasts long. The disease can also cause swelling of the brain (encephalitis), but this is very rare.

### How is rubella spread?

The virus that causes rubella lives in the nose and throat and is sprayed into the air when an infected person sneezes, coughs or talks. Other people nearby can then inhale the virus. Touching tissues or sharing a cup used by someone with rubella also spreads the virus.

### Who gets rubella?

Rubella is most common among school-aged children and young adults, but people of any age can get the disease. Most cases occur during winter and spring. People who have had rubella are immune; they cannot get it again.

### Is rubella dangerous?

Yes, it is very dangerous if a woman catches it while she is pregnant. The rubella virus can cause blindness, heart defects, mental retardation, and death in babies infected before birth.

### Is there a test for rubella immunity?

Yes, there is a blood test that will show whether a person is immune to rubella. Because the disease can cause severe damage to a growing fetus, all women who want to have children should be tested, just to be safe. About one in six women of childbearing age in the U.S. is not immune to the disease.

### Can rubella be prevented?

Yes, there is a vaccine to prevent rubella. (It is usually given with measles and mumps vaccines in one shot called MMR.) The vaccine is normally given to children at 15 months of age, but older children and adults — especially women of childbearing age — who are not immune should also be vaccinated.

## **Is the rubella vaccine safe?**

Yes, it is safe for most people. About one in ten people who get the vaccine will have aching and swollen joints. This side effect is most common in teenagers and women, and does not last long. The vaccine can be given to breastfeeding mothers without any danger to their babies.

People who have health problems (such as cancer or other problems that have weakened their immune systems) should check with their doctor or nurse before getting immunized. People with HIV infection can get the vaccine after checking with a doctor or nurse. There is no proof that the vaccine will harm a fetus, but just to be safe, women who are pregnant or expect to become pregnant within three months should not be vaccinated until after the baby is born.

## **Should health care workers be extra careful about rubella?**

Yes. Health care workers who are not immune to rubella can pick up the virus and spread it to their co-workers and patients. The results could be tragic if one of them is pregnant and not immune. That is why state regulations say that health care workers who have no record of rubella vaccination or whose blood tests show they are not immune must stay out of work from the 7th day through the 21st day after being exposed to the disease.

## **Where can you get more information?**

**Your doctor or nurse**

**Your local board of health**

Listed in the telephone book under local government

### **Massachusetts Department of Public Health**

Immunization Program Main Office (617) 522-3700, x420

Boston Immunization Office (617) 534-5609

Central Immunization Office, West Boylston (508) 792-7880

Northeast Immunization Office, Tewksbury (508) 851-7261

Southeast Immunization Office, Lakeville (508) 947-1231

Western Immunization Office, Amherst (413) 545-6600

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